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Being Unitarian when the plane goes down

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

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Inquiring Words

Ever-Present Divine Spirit

Dear Ever-Present Divine Spirit

Help us to listen more often,

Help us to accept more readily,

the loving guidance that quietly rests within us.

Dear Ever-Present Divine Spirit

Help us to look upon you as a constant friend.

Help us to have the confidence to know
you will never leave us.

Because you are us, within us

Waiting to be heard

Dear Ever-Present Divine Spirit

Help us to see

the evidence of your love and guidance
in times of joy and sorrow.

And to truly understand that we are eternally united.

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When the plane goes down

Unitarian is the only thing to be



Imagined plane crashes and cricket can give us perspective on Unitarian faith, says Rob Whiteman. Photo by Kevin Tuck, www.rgbstock.com

Rob Whiteman offers his response to GA President Bill Darlison's recent article, explaining why he too, is 'still a Unitarian'.

In his sermon to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the Scottish Unitarian Association Bill Darlison, the President of the General Assembly, took as his theme "Why I am still a Unitarian" and then proceeded to say a number of things that many saw as unnecessarily harsh, even rude about Unitarianism – without fully rebuilding what he had knocked down. I am not going to stand as an apologist for Bill nor am I going to bad mouth the head honcho in British and Irish Unitarianism. This piece is a response, not a reply, to Bill's sermon (reprinted in *The Inquirer*, 4 January).

As a starting point I am taking his anecdote: "A few years ago, Denis Conway, the noted Irish actor, who is a prominent member of the Dublin Unitarian church, went to Zimbabwe to attend a reunion at a school he used to teach in. On the way back the plane was caught up in terrible turbulence which scared Denis witless, and he joined his fellow passengers in making frantic signs of the cross, and in mumbling hurried acts of contrition. 'There's one thing for sure, Bill,' he told me, 'there are no Unitarians when the plane's going down.'"

I suggest that Unitarian is the only thing to be when the plane is going down.

Bill cited the particular power of Roman Catholicism in his own background. I am sure that is why he said he reverted to that in times of particular stress and comes from his own experience. We are all products of our own experience.

I prefer to focus on the positive things that Bill said about Unitarianism. He had three points. Firstly he said that "Unitarians are simply the best people I know". In the 2011 census there were 490 Unitarians in Scotland, somewhat dwarfed by the 11,746 Jedi Knights but somehow I suspect that you are more likely to meet a Unitarian. Returning to my plane I cannot remember the last time that I sat on a plane

without sitting next to a Unitarian and yes, they are good people to sit next to on a plane.

His second positive was the democratic way in which the movement operates. He felt it was liberating that as the President, he could say highly critical things of the movement in a public way without real fear. Now is not the time to discuss the democratic principles of the movement or whether it is better than other denominations in this. If the plane is going down it simply doesn't matter. Crashing planes have a great gift in sifting the irrelevant from the mind.

Thirdly, he welcomed the scope in Unitarianism for change, even the appetite for it. He noted that those who fought for religious freedom and set up the Scottish Unitarian Association would hardly recognise the Unitarianism of Britain today. His final call was: "Change is needed now. If we are to survive, we must develop a comprehensive religious system which is intellectually stimulating enough to satisfy the mind in its healthful moments of quiet reflection, but which also has the emotional power to help us through those inevitable periods when our lives are beset by turbulence. If we can successfully marry the two – and I honestly believe that we are beginning to marry them, that we are starting to do what Rilke calls 'the heart-work' – we can help to change the religious consciousness of Britain."

I think that Bill may be behind the times. As ever, cricket can show us the way forward. In 136 years of Test cricket there have been 3,649 Test centuries scored by 697 batsmen. A recent book has compared these; not in the style of a pub argument in written form but in a scientific manner. All Test centuries were measured in 10 categories: size, percentage of team score, speed, bowling attack, pitch conditions, chances given, match impact, series impact, compatibility of attack and conditions, intangibles. Descriptions and statistics for the top 100 have been made into a book. I would like to take forward such an approach to Unitarianism.

Luckily I have been helped in this by an article from the October magazine of Dublin Unitarians in which a long-

(Continued on next page)

Faith comes down to the intangibles

(Continued from previous page)

standing member wonders what it means to be a good Unitarian. She measures herself in three categories: freedom, reason and tolerance and considers how well she fares in each; giving herself 1.5 out of 3. But I feel that she is a hard marker on herself. The new Unitarian strapline is “nurturing faith, embracing life, celebrating difference” but I think that is a difficult mouthful to turn into the sort of metrics that I am trying here.

I looked at our ‘Unitarians in Edinburgh’ website which has four statements that as Unitarians:

1. We are not required to assent to any creed or statement of faith; the emphasis is on being true to oneself – I reflected on this as I stood at Evensong the other week. When they said the Apostles Creed, I reckoned that I could sign up to 8 of the 109 words; in other words 93% non assent for me there.

2. We recognise the worth and dignity of all peoples and their freedom to believe as their conscience dictates – I wondered how I might score this in a rational and quantifiable way and realised the task was not a sensible one, at least the way that I was going about it.

Going back to the cricket book, I realised that the final category was the most important – intangibles. Many shots score 1, 2, 4 or 6 runs, many balls take wickets but some live a lot longer in the mind and memory for reasons that are often difficult to explain. Those moments are the ones that bring true joy and peace.

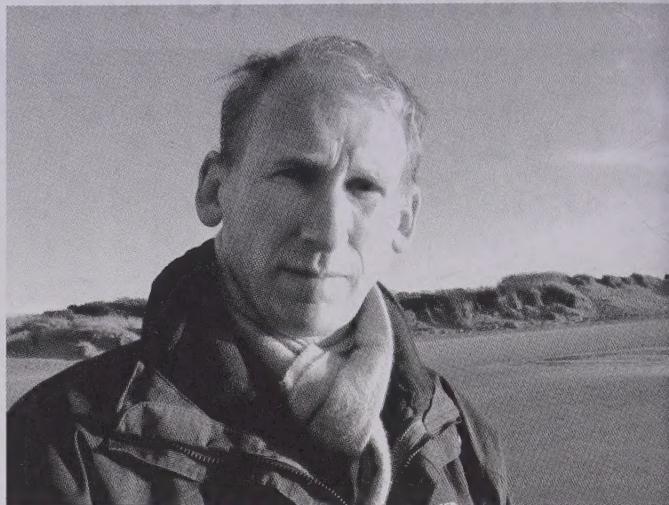
In *A Dream too wild, Emerson meditations for every day* he expresses this in a different way: “Our moral nature is vitiated by any interference of our will. People represent virtue as a struggle, and take to themselves great airs upon their attainments, and the question is everywhere vexed, when a noble nature is commended, whether the man is not better who strives with temptation. But there is no merit in the matter. Either God is there, or he is not there. We love characters in proportion as they are impulsive and spontaneous. The less a man thinks or knows about his virtues, the better we like him... When we see a soul whose acts are all regal, graceful, and as pleasant as roses, we must thank God that such things can be and are”

How to feel when the plane goes down?

So how do I think that I will feel as a Unitarian when the plane is going down? If I am sitting in the pilot’s seat; responsible. More likely, I will be elsewhere and, I suspect, quite relaxed. Let me explain why. When I first encountered Unitarianism the Unitarian in question explained that they took a positive view of humanity. These were not people weighed down with guilt and worry, burdened by original sin but rather people who celebrated life and the world around them; people for whom the glass was a lot more than half-full rather than inherently dirty and unworthy. This outlook appealed to me then and still does now.

In our congregation we were invited to put leaves and fruit on a tree that the young people had made. Leaves represented a belief that we hold or spiritual practice that we undertake – and a fruit about how this manifests in our daily life. At the foot of the tree, we put leaves for things that we left behind. For me, those leaves at the foot were the most significant.

As I reflected I realised that the concepts of sin and priesthood



Rob Whiteman

were no longer valid for me. This does not mean that I get everything right and never make a mistake, act perfectly, etc; more that those failings are not inherent or evil but simply that they are part of being. No-one deliberately makes a mess of their life, everyone is doing the best job that they can with what they have. It is human nature to do so with the resources that you have. Deep down, we all know when we have not done what we could have done, not acted as we should have done; sometimes we might not know why that may be but I don’t think anyone ever deliberately sabotages their own life.

No mediator needed between us and God

We may not make all the right decisions using some objective measure but looked at subjectively we do take what looks to us like the best option. It is surprisingly easy to look at other people’s lives and decide that they have made the wrong decisions, but I do not think that we deliberately make a decision that is anything other than what we believe to be the best for ourselves. Following that, I realised that priesthood made no sense to me either. If I am making the best go of my life why would I need someone to mediate between me and God? No-one is better placed than me. So as the plane goes down, we assume to a hard landing, I would like to think that I will be able to sit there and reflect on the joys that I have had in my life, as well as the bad times, and know that I have lived my life as well as I can. For I can do no other nor, now, can I change it. So I can sit there with that quiet confidence that comes from being a Unitarian; a reassurance. I, and only I, am responsible for what I have made of my life. I can meet God (and yes I believe that I will) confident in that knowledge. I find this something of great reassurance. It is an intangible but in the end it is that which will be with me when the plane goes down – something of the heart rather than the head and for me it is that which is the great gift in Unitarianism. Yes, there is all the intellectual stuff and I find that very interesting and rewarding but in the end there is an inner confidence in Unitarianism derived from being truly in touch with oneself and the world around you that I find satisfying and which I expect to give me comfort and confidence on the descending plane and I truly hope that Bill feels that too.

Rob Whiteman is a member of St Mark’s Church Edinburgh, where he delivered this as a sermon. He was recently offered a place to study for the Unitarian ministry

How meditation enhances my faith

By Tony McNeile

As part of my religious quest I lead a small meditation group. We usually meet about once a month. The session consists firstly of us just sitting quietly, there may be some gentle music playing. We close our eyes and try to breathe gently and evenly.

And we try to empty our heads of every day thoughts but what usually happens is that your mind does the complete opposite fills up with them – all sorts of things – things you've forgotten to do; things you should be doing, people you need to talk to. They just race round – and we say, 'Let them! Don't take them on'. Don't chase them. In time the thoughts will fade and you are left with a feeling of stillness and calmness and peacefulness. We call it centring down.

Then we might practice using our minds – concentrating on colours or on healing, or visualising the scenes as a descriptive piece is read.

We think that these exercises help us to know ourselves better; they help us to be more tolerant of life and to be more compassionate. It is developing concentration and mindfulness.

The ideal of meditation is live in a state of equanimity – of balance. It is an ideal. But trying to achieve it takes time. Taking time is much better than not trying at all.

In Buddhism, such a state of equanimity or balance leads to a feeling of happiness and joy – joy in everything. 'Joy in the joy of others', is a phrase I like. The end point of Buddhist meditation is nirvana – to lose one's own sense of self-importance or ego and to be absorbed in the dharma. The dharma is the divinity of the whole world, the divinity in everything. We understand the dharma to mean that everything is sacred and everything should be treated with respect – from the laying hen we imprison in a cage, to the people we struggle to rub along with on a daily basis.

All life is sacred and life is joyful and we are part of it. We are all connected to each other through the dharma – we are all one with everything else. This is what Carl Jung called the universal consciousness that exists within our own unconscious minds. Jung said we suppress this universal by believing that our own egos are more important and better informed.

My religion is two things – first it is that community where I am welcomed and feel safe. It is where I can practice my faith – reinforce it through the worship and rituals; where I feel safe to explore and challenge the guidelines of belief – and where I feel happy and where I feel joyful. It's where I can regain my footing when life knocks me off a stepping stone.

The second is my personal religion, where I can say that to me God is that river of life which I can live in joyfully. Where my prayers are not to a God, person or an organisation, asking for this or that benefit – but are a personal or collective plea made into the river of life; that stream of the universal consciousness, or the dharma. To me the river of life is beyond and higher than the gods of scriptures. My religion is a universal religion where everything is sacred and everything is respected.

I have to admit I am a lucky one – I have my meditation and I have my religion – but I am aware that there are many, many people in this modern age who have neither. I can only tell them what makes me happy.

The Rev Tony McNeile is minister with the National Unitarian Fellowship.



A meditational prayer

Let us build a walled garden for our spirits, fill it with warm sunshine, flowers and trees in blossom and birds singing. Let it be a safe haven for small animals and for ourselves – a place to rest and contemplate. A place to build up our energies and restore our souls. In our garden let there be special places with seats and fountains – places to pause and think about life.

Let one of these special places be dedicated to love and another to forgiveness.

The garden of love is to contemplate the love that is caritas – care and compassion and charity for all living things. Caritas for our own loved ones and our friends. Caritas for the people whose lives we touch as we pass through each day. Lives to appreciate and give thanks for. Lives to understand. And in the garden of love that is caritas let there be a place where we can see our own reflection.

At the entrance to the garden of forgiveness is a saying from the prayer that Jesus taught – 'As we forgive them that trespass against us'.

Let this garden be a garden of paths and spaces and places to write a promise. A corner to sit and ponder about forgiveness – why it is harder to forgive than to love; why the scars and blemishes of old hurts and misunderstandings still give pain. Why anger burns slow and destructive and will not go out. How to deal with an insult or manage an injustice. How to review a comment or a moment and look for a truth and not a poisoned arrow.

From the garden of forgiveness let there be a gate into the garden of love and from the garden of love a way of return to the world.

– Tony McNeile

Photo by Steve Knight

UK should comply with court of human rights

By Tony Rees

Unitarian Penal Affairs Panel (PAP) declared itself in favour of the enfranchisement of all convicted prisoners while serving their sentences. Last October it published an Issues Paper, written by me, which brought the story up to date and reasserted this position. The principal arguments supporting the removal of prisoner disqualification are that the vote is a fundamental right, not a privilege, which must not be curtailed without very good reason; and that by helping the incarcerated to re-engage with society, it could play an important role in rehabilitation.

However, the Unitarian stance does not seem a very popular one. In February 2011, the House of Commons supported a motion to keep the status quo by 234 votes to 22. Only seven Labour MPs and a lone Conservative went into the 'no' lobby. The Prime Minister has said that he is "absolutely horrified" by the prospect of prisoner enfranchisement. Even temperate opponents fret that the removal of prisoner disqualification would fly in the face of public opinion, and that no-one much wants the change, including most prisoners.

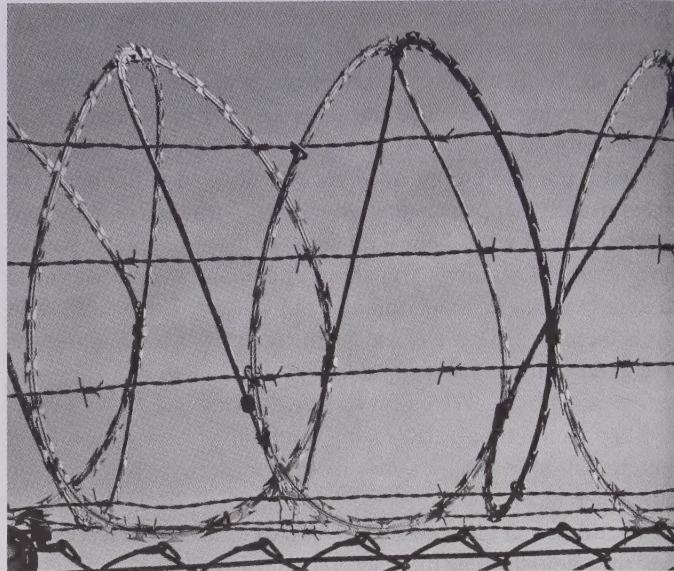
Lifer sought right to vote

As a pressing political issue, the story begins in 2001, when John Hirst, convicted of manslaughter and serving a discretionary life sentence, sought a declaration that his disenfranchisement was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (and Fundamental Freedoms, although the full title is rarely given in this country). When his plea was rejected in the English Courts he took his case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which unanimously found in his favour. The British Government then appealed to the Grand Chamber of the ECHR, which in 2005 again upheld Hirst's case, this time by a majority verdict.

There followed an extended period in which successive British administrations cultivated enough long grass to clothe a thousand hay-meadows. Labour launched two public consultations, to one of which the PAP responded. The 2011 Commons debate was the first ever devoted to the subject, and was held in Private Members', not Government, time. Then, in November 2012, just 24 hours before the expiry of the ECHR's deadline for compliance, the new Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, published a draft bill, which offered three options: Schedule One would enfranchise all those sentenced to less than four years imprisonment, Schedule Two would replace the four years with six months or less, while Schedule Three would re-enact the current ban (in defiance of the ECHR).

ECHR seeks proportionate response

It is important to realise that the ECHR has never demanded that *all* convicted prisoners should obtain the vote. It has merely requested that the British Government's response to its judgement be reasoned and 'proportionate'. Some critics believe it is usurping the functions of national governments: yet the Court has established what it calls 'a margin of appreciation', which takes account of the various legal traditions and policy preferences in Convention countries. Conservatively-minded opponents of the alleged activism of the ECHR object to its self-description of its role as a 'living instrument', although that is the usual mode of interpretation of international treaties. How would gay rights have fared if they had been tied to the preconceptions and prejudices



of legislators in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the Convention was drawn up and signed?

Since the PAP Issues Paper appeared there have been developments. In May 2013 a Parliamentary Joint Committee (of Lords and Commons) was set up to give pre-legislative scrutiny of the Draft Voting Eligibility (Prisoners) Bill. Chaired by Nick Gibb, the former Conservative Schools Minister, it was composed of representatives of all parties and of none (a Crossbench Peer). Its report – a notably well-researched document – which came out before Christmas, rejects continued flouting of the ECHR judgement, and carefully considers, but then dismisses, most of the arguments advanced in support of the current ban. (See the report here: <http://tinyurl.com/m64tg34>)

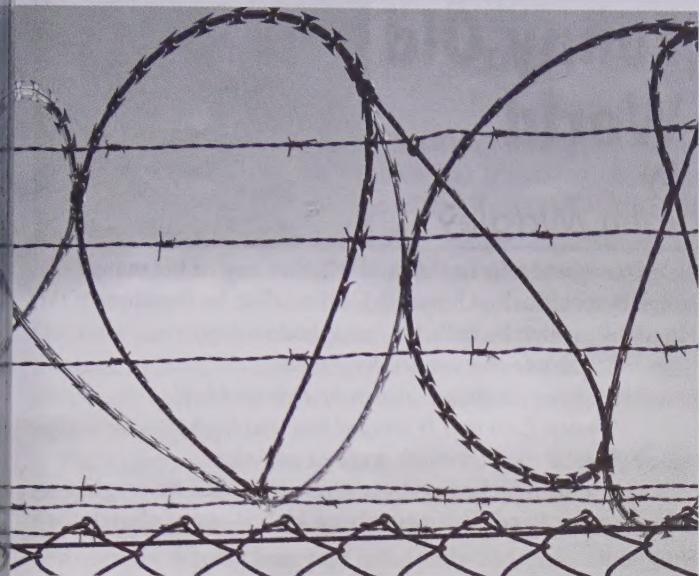
PAP advocacy will continue

Instead, it recommends enacting legislation so that "all prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or less should be entitled to vote in all UK Parliamentary, local and European elections." The report calculates that this would have enfranchised rather over 7,000 of the 66,000 UK, Irish and Commonwealth citizens aged 18+ serving sentences of detention on 30 September 2013. Would the Joint Committee's recommendation satisfy the Council of Ministers (which decides on behalf of the ECHR)? For political reasons and out of sheer weariness they may accept it: we'll have to see.

The PAP will continue to advocate a more thorough-going reform – the rehabilitation arguments are actually more cogent applied to long-term than to short-term prisoners. However, the adoption of this compromise should obviate the dreadful consequences of continued defiance of the ECHR's ruling, or, worse, of withdrawal from the whole Convention system, which was to a considerable extent a project of British jurists. Both policy choices would open the UK to potentially huge claims for compensation, as countries cannot rid themselves of their obligations retrospectively. And think of the appalling example which would be given to countries with less secure democratic and civil rights traditions than our own!

*Tony Rees is a member of the Unitarian General Assembly
Penal Affairs Panel. Prison photo by Miguel Saavedra*

rights and give prisoners the vote



(An Excerpt from the Penal Affairs Panel Issues Paper 15 – Voting for Prisoners)

The British prohibition (on prisoners voting) is not the norm in Europe. Nineteen countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the Nordic states, allow prisoners to vote without restriction. Twelve others impose some limitations. In France, for example, disenfranchisement is treated as part of the sentence: prisoners may vote if the right is given by the court. More commonly, it depends on length of sentence – those serving longer terms are more likely to be barred – or on the nature of the offence, conviction for a felony, for example, or for ‘crimes against the state’ such as treason. ... Apart from Russia, the 11 states which join the United Kingdom in depriving convicted prisoners of the vote have relatively small populations, and the list shows a pronounced bias towards the Eastern edges of the continent. It should be noted that only if a citizen of a country brings a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which then results in an adverse determination against the Government of that country, compliance will be required: if there is no such reference, existing laws and practices may continue as before. The legally-aided Mr (John) Hirst (who brought the UK case to the ECHR) has frequently been slated by British politicians and commentators for his temerity in striving to assert his rights.

Commonwealth and US take a harder line

British Commonwealth countries and the USA usually take a harder line on this issue. In the latter case, citizenship, which determines eligibility for the vote, is governed by federal law, but where there is no such law or constitutional amendment, as with prisoners’ voting, the individual states are allowed considerable discretion in fixing qualifications for suffrage and candidacy. There are thus 50 different systems. ... If the phrase is taken to mean ‘complete and without exception’, there is no ‘blanket ban’ in the United Kingdom. Those imprisoned for contempt of court and by reason of default (e.g. for failure to pay a fine) have never been disqualified, and in 2000, prisoners on remand, prisoners convicted but not yet sentenced, and unconvicted mental patients joined them.

... It is important to stress that the ECHR did *not* demand that all prisoners should be accorded the vote: it recognised

that there had to be ‘a margin of appreciation’, to allow signatory countries to fit ECHR decisions into their individual legal systems and traditions. The Court affirmed that in this instance the ‘margin’ needed to be wide.

... Opponents of prisoner voting often argue that, apart from a few oddballs like Hirst, there is no demand among prisoners for the vote, citing as evidence the alleged facts that before entering prison many failed to register, have never or rarely cast a vote, and indeed have evinced a singular lack of interest in public affairs. Enfranchisement, they say, would impose an additional burden on prisons, unwanted by staff or most inmates. At the very least, they continue, entitlement to vote should depend on prior or previous enlistment on an electoral roll. What seems to be rather forgotten in these and similar objections is that the franchise is not permission or a privilege: it is a fundamental right of citizenship.

Victorian approach is too draconian

The Victorian justification for disenfranchisement, which was consequential on recourse to the Poor Law as well as receiving a custodial sentence, lay in the notion of ‘civic death’. This is too draconian for present-day tastes, and opponents of prisoner voting rarely cite it today, although a whiff of it occurred in some contributions to the 2011 Parliamentary debate.

... Especially noteworthy is the reluctance of supporters of disqualification to engage with the concept of rehabilitation. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the bad fist which the United Kingdom has made of rehabilitation in recent years – lack of availability of paid and productive work in prisons, limited educational facilities, locking prisoners up in their cells for most hours in the day, and above all sending them out on discharge with a travel warrant and £46 which is supposed to last until the payment of benefits kicks in.

Rehabilitation is, nevertheless, at the forefront of the arguments for enfranchisement. Prisoners tend to be – or become while they are inside – more than averagely uncoupled from stable personal and family relationships, only loosely connected to social and community (non-criminal) networks, and unused to the world of work or rusty in their approaches to it. Restoration of citizenship rights (and their attendant obligations) while incarcerated could therefore play a useful part in reintegrating them into society.

For Christians, another belief which should be relevant is in redemption: human beings should not be treated as incapable of it. Unitarians, along with other religious groups such as the Quakers, have been in the forefront of campaigns for penal reform, and prisoner enfranchisement is one, not terribly major, aspect of this concern. Indeed, it is hard to see what all the fuss has been about. Why are so many prominent people so opposed? Enabling prisoners to vote would not mean that any of the walls or struts of society would cave in. The demands of the ECHR are actually rather minimal, and there is a good case for going beyond them and coming into line with our most progressive European neighbours. There might need to be a few exceptions, such as those with some serious mental conditions, but the easiest, cleanest way of complying with the Grand Chamber’s decision, productive of the fewest anomalies and presenting no more administrative difficulties than part-enfranchisement, would be to extend the vote to all prisoners.

Reporting from the Big (frozen) Apple

Hurray! Off to New York for the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU) biennial (that's every two years) gathering. My wife Celia is a member of its Executive Committee and helped organise this event plus an additional conference for ministers. Checking weather forecasts, I was relieved to see that they were reporting 10 degrees, only to discover to my astonishment that in the US they work in Fahrenheit, so 10F means 12C below zero! Forearmed, or should I say 'forelegged' with this news, I donned my enormous teacosy anorak, woolly hat and scarf plus a more intimate thermal undergarment, the nature of which I'll leave you to guess, though my name gives a clue.

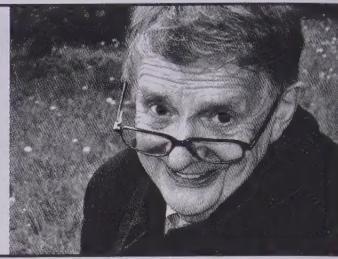
The ICUU meetings were held at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, on Long Island. This congregation is renowned for its massive endowment and fabulous premises. An extraordinarily generous bequest of oil well rights some decades ago brings in an annual income figure with so many zeroes on it that one's head begins to spin. With this the growing congregation has built a beautiful sanctuary plus well-staffed and luxuriously extensive premises set in delightful grounds, big enough to accommodate our conference of over 120 people. In addition, more than 50 of their volunteers turned out to shop, prepare, cook, set up, serve and clean up after three lunches and three dinners. They served us in coffee breaks, assisted with the welcome party and pre-dinner reception, guided us to various activity rooms and staffed their information desk and bookshop in the main lobby, adding other tasks as they arose. It was delightfully reassuring to see folk on hand wearing their name tags and 'ask me' placards.

We shared Sunday morning worship with the Shelter Rock congregation who were thrilled to learn that there are growing numbers of UUs of many languages, colours, traditions and cultures all around the world. As Executive Secretary Steve Dick put it, "We have members now on every continent except Antarctica, so if anyone has contacts there, be sure to let me know!" Three sermons from ICUU representatives included Celia Midgley who gave a description of her life and experience and reminded everyone that the idea of creating ICUU came from Britain. There was lots of music and singing and sharing and the climax was a surprise visit from the children of the congregation with their brilliantly colourful dragon, which danced its way around the chapel to celebrate the Chinese New Year. A full report of the whole conference will appear in a future issue of *The Inquirer*.

Churchgoing in the US is varied and thought-provoking. We transferred to the Community Church of New York in Manhattan for the opening of the Ministers' Conference. The congregation there is grieving for the loss of one of their members, the renowned folk singer-songwriter and activist, Pete Seeger. For almost the whole of his 94 years he sang and marched for peace and justice. Harassed as a communist, condemned by a McCarthyite hearing, he reached the peak of his renown leading the singing of *We Shall Overcome* for the 1960s Civil Rights marches, a record of which I have that still gives me shivers down the spine. I saw him once in a small coffee bar in Birmingham when I was a teenager, marvelled at his banjo-picking skills and joined in his songs in support of 'labor unions'. He joined Community Church a few years

Funny Old World

By John Midgley



ago. *UU World* tells us: 'Asked whether any of his many songs is specifically Unitarian Universalist, he mentions 'Old Hundred', which he calls his 'unorthodoxology':

*All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing out for peace 'tween heav'n and hell.
'Tween East and West and low and high,
Sing! Peace on earth and sea and sky.*

"It hasn't been picked up by a single hymnal," he laughs. "On the other hand, I've never been kicked out of church for singing it."

All Souls UU Church on Lexington Avenue, also in Manhattan, is an altogether different experience. This enormous, beautiful UU cathedral has large congregations at two morning services per Sunday, a robed choir, a children's choir, two trumpets along with the organ in the gallery and a long list of busy midweek activities. Ironically, the sermon was mainly about the growing concern for the decline in church-going in the US. "Church needs a make-over," the Rev Galen Guengerich proclaimed. "We should start telling the world about the evidence that people involved in religion are healthier, happier and live longer than those who are not." I wondered if that would make a useful strap-line for the GA Visibility Strategy Group to use.

A little free time gave a few of us the chance to see the gritty, black and white realism film *Nebraska*. Far away from swinging New York City, this wide, largely barren state witnesses much rural poverty. An elderly resident has fallen for a magazine scam telling him he could have won a million dollars. He trudges off to claim his prize, leaving a trail of gossip, sadness and family strife in his wake. The magazine secretary finally tells him he is not a lucky winner, and asks his hapless son, who has accompanied him on this fruitless excursion, "Does your father have Alzheimer's?"

"No. He just believes what people tell him."

"Oh, that's *too* bad."

I also enjoyed a tour of Radio City Music Hall, a fabulous 1930s art deco cinema which also hosts shows and musicals. Seating over 6000, it is the largest theatre in the world, with amazing stage facilities and acoustics. Still puzzled why church-going at the local level declines, while ICUU group membership world-wide is growing apace, I briefly wondered if Steve Dick might one day book this opulent picture palace for our ICUU gathering, singing to the mighty Wurlitzer. Along with the shows and musicals have always gone live dance routines from the Rockettes. These super-fit women undertake high-kick, Tiller Girl style routines, several times daily. One of them was available for a photo-opportunity so I now have, secreted away, a picture of me with her displaying her fabulous dancer's legs. I was relieved that I was not expected to show mine, with or without the long-johns.

Lindy Latham honoured in Bristol

Part-time minister made a big impact on Bristol group, says Susan Wildman

Almost 100 people gathered at Unitarian Meeting Bristol on Saturday 4 January when members and friends of the Bristol Group attended a celebration of the Rev Lindy Latham's ministry in Bristol. Lindy moved to Bristol to be near to her Mother and was welcomed to the Bristol Group by the then-minister, the Rev Gerald Whitaker and his wife June. After Gerald's premature death, Lindy was appointed as part-time minister in 2006. Everyone agrees that her seven years of ministry have been more than part-time and her cheerful encouragement will be greatly missed.

The event started with a welcome from Jean Bryant, President of the Bristol Group and lighting of the chalice candle by Lis Dyson Jones, who led the service, which followed. In her opening words, Jean said that Lindy had been a friend as well as a minister who had listened and helped her congregations and supported them in all their events. She had initiated



Lis Dyson-Jones, (left) former president of the Unitarian General Assembly, conducted the retirement service for the Rev Lindy Latham (right).

reflections. After an amusing introduction she pointed out that Lindy has been and is still making a contribution to the wider Unitarian movement. She is currently National President of the Ministerial Fellowship and provides exceptional support for her ministerial colleagues. She is much respected for the work she does with those wishing to train for the ministry. She is a founder member of the longest existing covenant group of ministers and has given valuable help and advice to this group. She was the instigator and visionary of the 'Bright Lights' the all-age group programme in Bristol.

The service ended with a Benediction and Purcell's 'Trumpet Tune' played on the organ by Bob Cook after which Lindy was presented with flowers. There followed a splendid tea organised by Sally Pugh and Jane Hulin. For those able to stay there was entertainment including singing by the 'Bright Lights' who gave Lindy a book of photographs of some of their meetings put together by Anna Sherman.

A number of visitors had come some distance for this event including the Rev Eric Jones from Aberdare, the Rev Sue Woolley from Northampton, Martin Fieldhouse, President of the Western Union and former Frenchay members Anne and Peter Barwell who braved the West Country floods to come from Exeter. Karl Stewart, Bristol Group President, thanked everyone for coming and said that Lindy would always be welcomed by the congregations in the future. Everyone hopes that Lindy will enjoy her retirement trip to New Zealand as much as she did her sabbatical visit to India.

Susan Wildman is a member of the Bristol Unitarian Group.



Caitlin McAdam (right) and her mother Delydd McAdam played during the service. Photos by Fiona Vallis

several study and training workshops and an all age group. Lindy conducted many weddings, funerals and baby namings, always sensitive to the needs of those involved. Everyone appreciated her pastoral care. During her ministry Unitarian Meeting became the first religious building in Bristol to be registered for Civil Partnerships. The first of these took place last summer for Karl Stewart and Mark Gartside after which Lindy conducted a wedding ceremony.

During the service there were three hymns: "Come sing a song with me", "Flying Free" and "Song of Peace", all from the purple hymn book which Lindy introduced to the Bristol Group. The readings were given by Bernard Omar, President of the Frenchay Chapel, and Karl Stewart, President of Unitarian Meeting. Delydd McAdam sang a solo, "Three Kings" by Peter Cornelius accompanied on the piano by Bob Cook who played the organ for the hymns and musical contributions.

In her address 'Reflections on Ministry' Lindy quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson who spoke of converting life into truth. Lindy said that she had striven to speak her own truth and create communities of kindness. Lis Dyson Jones gave some wider



Members of the 'Bright Lights' all-ages group serenaded Lindy Latham at her retirement service.

Letters to the Editor

Executive Committee overstepped its mandate

I would like to comment upon the rejection of the Rev Dr Vernon Marshall's nomination as Honorary Vice President by Unitarian General Assembly's Executive Committee. Nowhere in our GA's constitution is it stated that the EC has been given the power to do this. The constitution does not give the EC the power to either reject or approve nominations to honorary positions. How and why this EC, and previous ones, have assumed this power, *ultra vires*, must be a concern to all of us.

Section 8 of our constitution says 'The Honorary Officers shall be elected annually ...' (by the GA one assumes). It does not say that candidates need prior approval (or, by implication, rejection) by the EC.

Section 12, which sets out the business of the EC and defines its roles, says 'The EC shall appoint any subsidiary committees, a Chief Executive and approve appointment of all other paid staff...' Honorary positions are, by definition, unpaid and therefore not subject to EC approval. Presumably, if it was intended to give the EC power to approve honorary appointments at any stage, this would have been stated explicitly in the constitution.

So my first point is that the EC has no power to do what it did; the fact that other ECs in the past have exercised such power illegitimately does not make it right, or excuse this EC from overreaching itself.

Secondly, our default position should be that if only one candidate puts himself or herself forward for a year or two of unpaid hard work, away from home often, travelling up and down the country, with a consequent cost to their personal and family life, then we should accept that offer graciously and gratefully and not reject it without even the courtesy of answering requests for an explanation.

No explanation has been forthcoming so we are left to assume, perhaps wrongly, that there are doctrinal or theological concerns. If that is the case we should remind ourselves that we have very little doctrine binding us and our theological differences are to be accepted, debated and celebrated.

These are our strengths. I am sure the Rev Dr Marshall would project our values and represent that plurality of views just as any other Vice President from any other strand of Unitarian thinking would. Contrast that with the image we present to the world of high-handed, un-mandated decision-making which humiliates one of our own and is apparently not to be questioned or justified.

The Rev Dr Marshall says he feels destroyed, insulted and that he has been treated with contempt. He has felt the brunt of it but we, and Unitarianism, have all been damaged by it as well.

Trevor Clarke

President of and writing on behalf of Oldham Chapel

Bill Darlison stirred us up

To the Editor:

I thank the Rev Bill Darlison for successfully stirring us up to consider our failings as a movement, (*The Inquirer*, 4 January) and the necessity to change, though I think we have done a bit better than some of his 19th-century examples. His final summing up called for the creation of a 'comprehensive religious system' – which to my mind sounded like that of the Catholic Church with its drama, colour, scents, music, 'heart and head work' catering from ignorant peasant to erudite pope. Earlier examples were also given of its efficient childhood brain-washing practices.

I don't think our varied movement, however, urged on to 'help to change the religious consciousness of Britain' must for the present, with all the dogged realism of our forefathers, be content with a bit of leavening.

June Teape

Felixstowe

Atheists and stained glass

To the Editor:

John Midgley wonders what Atheists would put in a stained-glass window. (*Funny Old World*, 1 February)

According to Charles B Upton (Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Manchester College, Oxford) 'Atheism both etymologically and by usage, is essentially a negative conception and

exists only as an expression of dissent from positive theistic beliefs'. May I suggest therefore that the answer to John's question is a 'big brick'.

John S Wilkinson

Retired URC minister
Stonehouse, Glos

BBC didn't always spurn Unitarians

To the Editor:

Re BBC's apparent reluctance to air Unitarians

Nearly half a century ago, the BBC broadcast live an entire Unitarian Service on its Sunday "Morning Service" feature. This was the main national religious broadcast of the week, and was from Dover Unitarian Church, on 17th Sept, 1967, provided by the congregation as their usual weekly Service.

Hundreds of letters and messages of appreciation and congratulation were received, from Unitarians, including the President and Council members and Officers, and from members of the public.

The BBC was also impressed, and produced a 12" LP of the whole service, copies of which may still be available.

The Rev David Skelton

Retired Minister

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

Don't be so quick to claim Dickens

By Barry Cundill

I am replying to Doris Haughton's 'Shared Story' piece (*Inquirer*, 18 January) which interested me greatly. Firstly, with regard to her central theme, I too feel a little uneasy at times when certain historical figures are lauded as having been Unitarian. We tend to gloss over the fact that our movement has evolved to such a great extent, particularly during the 19th century, so that aspects of the present Church would be very alien to the likes of those we espouse as 'famous Unitarians'. Of particular interest to me are Doris's comments on Charles Dickens. Criticism inevitably and understandably centres around his conduct towards his wife and family and his affair with an actress many years his junior, Ellen Ternan.

This business is well documented and is often batted away by his defenders as being almost normal extra-marital behaviour among the middle classes of the day and the fact that he was 'bound' by the terms of separation suggested by his lawyer, i.e. the wife generally had the children removed from her presence and sphere of influence when the father could afford it and demanded it. There are defenders of Dickens who confuse literary greatness and genius (and I do not use the term genius lightly) with saintliness because of his moral themes and these people can see no bad in him.

Dickens was, however, a very complex and superstitious character, capable of individual acts of kindness but those who believed they knew him well realised also that they crossed him at their peril. Here is an example: his eldest son Charles married the daughter of his erstwhile publisher against his wishes. (CD had insisted on the former publisher publicly backing CD's version of a platonic relationship between himself and Ternan and the publisher refused). Dickens boycotted his son's funeral

as a result.

If this were all the questionable behaviour we could level at Dickens, I would not be sat here writing this. For many years I have read and studied CD's novels, his family and extended family, facts regarding the latter resulting in some very shocking findings indeed. If Dickens thought that the behaviour of those within the family sphere fell below *Charles Dickens* his expectations, he lampooned them mercilessly. Manifestations of this trait have not been recognised in their entirety but they present a facet of the great man which I find vindictive, malicious and disturbing.



I will soon be approaching publishers with a view to bringing the full stories to general notice but I will not be holding my breath as (a) I am not an academic and therefore an outsider to the establishment and (b) I am up against the entrenched position that 'we surely must know all there is to know about Dickens – witness the countless tomes written on him and the endless poring over his all too often bland correspondence.'

In a nutshell, yes Doris, the genius was also most definitely a stinker to boot!

Barry Cundill is a member of Park St Unitarian Church, Hull.

Emerson would not look to a movement

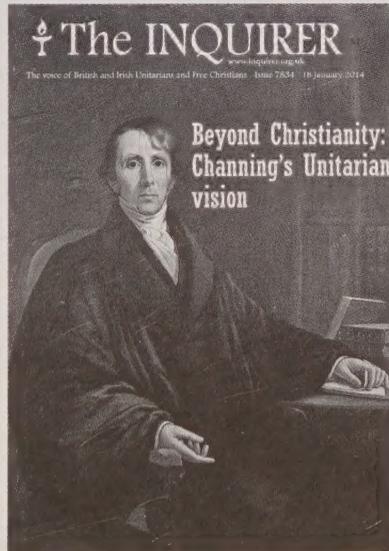
By Peter J Roberts

I am writing in response to the Channing Lecture on Emerson by the Rev Patrick O'Neill, published in *The Inquirers* of 18 January and 1 February.

As a long-time fan of Emerson I journeyed to North London for Patrick O'Neill's lecture, though I left soon after its end to catch a train for the South Coast. At that stage, the speaker was initiating a discussion on the relevance of his paper to contemporary British Unitarianism.

Patrick O'Neill was, of course, correct in highlighting Emerson's small "u" universalist approach to religious truth, but seemed to ignore his vital emphasis on the sufficiency of the individual's spiritual authority, in contrast to subscribing to some sectarian creed or singular teacher. It was, I believe, this idea that led to his leaving the ministry, and remaining, throughout his life, at a distance from even the Transcendentalist and Abolitionist movements. He was intent on being his own man.

In this context it is often overlooked that Nietzsche was influenced by Emerson, and that his concept of the Higher Man was not about a super-race or super-nation, but a unique and



utterly independent-minded individual.

Undoubtedly Emerson saw himself as a prophet in his own time and his stress on individual truth was in opposition to institutionalism of any kind. Thus I rather feel that the corporate attitudes currently embraced by both British and American Unitarianism would still have left him antipathetic.

Patrick O'Neill bemoans the 'long, wilful slide (of British Unitarianism) to institutional obsolescence' and argues the need for 'innovative initiatives to recast our vision'.

Perhaps we need to look back to see a way forward; our dissenting history is one of individuals who chose to shape events – not any 'movement' as such. Perhaps we therefore need to offer a minimally institutionalised vehicle for individuals in search of a wider way of spiritual evolution in an otherwise increasingly secularised, legalistic and materialist world. For me this is the Emersonian legacy and challenge to Unitarians.

The Rev Peter J Roberts is a retired Unitarian minister living in Worthing.

Unitarian Discovery holiday returns in 2014

Registration is now open for the 2014 Unitarian Discovery Holiday (formerly Unitarian Experience Week). The 2013 holiday took place for the second time in its current form at Great Hucklow last July, under the shadow of a perceived decline and a strong possibility that it might be the last one. However morale was high among regulars and newcomers alike, with a strong line-up of activities on offer. This year's theme was "Windows on the World and beyond..."

The welcome event included a quiz, set by Steven Williams, when a team called the "Faith & Freedom Fighters" triumphed by demonstrating their knowledge of such things as George Formby lyrics and the difference in weight between an ounce of silver and an ounce of cheese (the obvious answer is wrong). There were two theme talks; the first was "My stay at the Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village in India" by John Hewerdine; he spoke about meeting Margaret Barr in the 1960's, travelling to the Khasi Hills to work with her, and the work being done today among the children of this impoverished region. The second theme talk was Bill Darlison expounding his theory about the Zodiac in relation to Gospel of Mark.

Other activities included: a talk by Ann Peart on maps and how they influence our view of the world; a choir led by Margaret Lord; walks in the local countryside led by David Coppley; a craft-table run by Camilla Williams; poetry and prose, and a music appreciation session which included offerings as diverse as Bach, Bollywood, Arvo Part, and Ian Dury! Each



2013 Discovery holiday participants had high spirits.

day began and ended with an act of worship devised by participants. The holiday ended with a Serendipity Evening of words and music both spiritual and secular.

There will be a Unitarian Discovery Holiday this year (July 7-11). The theme will be "All the Colours of the Rainbow – Rainbow People, Rainbow World. Where do we fit in the Spectrum"? More details on our website www.unitariandiscoveryholiday.org.uk and on its Facebook page: <http://tinyurl.com/k549zh3>.

– Steven Williams

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Morning Engagement Group options for adults

A: The Conference of Birds with Rev John Harley and Claire MacDonald
B: The Art of Self-Recovery with Rev Rob Gregson and Kate Buchanan

C: Coming Home To Ourselves with Stephen Crowther and Kate McKenna

D: Identifying and living as your authentic self with Rev Winnie Gordon and Ned Prideaux

Morning groups for children and young people

This year, there will be two age groups, and extra activities during morning theme talks. Children will be the responsibility of their parents/carers at other times.

E: Life is a rollercoaster, without the sickness! (12 – 16 yrs) with Jim Blair

F: One more step (5 – 11 yrs) with Carrie Boyce and Claire Maddox

Theme speakers

Each morning there will be a special theme talk based on one aspect of our theme. This year's speakers are Jane Blackall, Celia Cartwright, Ralph Catts, Maria Curtis and Michael Dadson

Afternoon and evening activities

There is a range of optional activities each day, provided by the participants including arts/crafts, dancing, music and discussion.

Summer School Fees

Fees include accommodation, all activities and delicious meals!

Adult (shared): £485

Young people 12-16: £365

Children 5-11: £300

Children under 5: £130

Please do not let a shortage of money prevent you from attending! Summer School bursaries and other funding advice are available. For further details and application forms please email: info@hucklowsummerschool.org.uk or call Janet Costley on 01732 464211